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ABSTRACT

A weekend marathon training group in constructive fighting techniques for college student couples is described. Evaluation indicated that couples did learn constructive fighting skills, and that aspects of the relationship were improved. Techniques included behavioral goal setting, feedback, non-verbal aggression and intimacy exercises, videotape replay and structured discussion. Steps in designing workshops are outlined that may be applicable to other behavior oriented experiences. (Author)

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Development and Evaluation of Constructive Fighting Workshop

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The concepts of constructive fighting as used in this workshop were drawn primarily from the works of George Bach 1969 and Everett Shostrom 1967. They rather clearly defined the behaviors and outcomes of constructive and destructive marital fighting. Our task was to design and evaluate a workshop experience expanding on the M. Moore workshop, that would facilitate the development of the desired behaviors (or to use today's educational jargon, "competencies"). Bach has expanded the concept to include all relationships in his new book, Creative Aggression.

What then is a constructive fight? It is one in which the end result is positive rather than negative; in which the partners feel closer, more trusting and understanding as a consequence of having openly and honestly shared their real feelings, including perhaps verbalizing anger, and have resolved a concrete issue between them. They have listened to each other, given and received feedback, and gained new information about each other, and neither has been seriously hurt.

A destructive fight may be easier for all of us to visualize: hostile name-calling, dragging up of past grievances, attacks on values or persons near to the partner, subtle sabotage, premature apologizing, blowing up unpredictably over a trifle rather than the real issue, not listening to each other, distorting, walking out, humiliating, withholding, refusing to take the fight or the other persons position seriously, using physical violence.

Because the handling of conflicts is such a crucial part of relating, we hypothesized that acquisition of the constructive fighting skills defined above would be correlated with progress in other areas of the relationship as measured by the Relationship Goals Rating Scale (Uhlemann, Miller & Moore, 1971) and the Caring Relationship Inventory (Shostrom, 1966), and with movement toward self-actualization measured by the POI (Shostrom, 1966).

The actual progress of couples in fighting constructively was judged by 3 raters using Bach & Wyden's Fight Elements Profile to rate videotaped fights. A "before", "during" and 1 month 'after' training fight was recorded for each of 5 participant couples, and the 15 fights presented in random order to be scored independently.

I will return to the evaluation process in greater detail, but first I would like to describe the actual workshop.

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Participants were obtained through letters, notices in newspapers and referral. A group intake interview was held for all interested couples (in grou s of 2 or 3 couples). They were asked about their present fighting behavior and how they would like to change it. The leaders described the purpose and methods of the workshop. They wanted to be sure that the couples accepted were indeed motivated to work on their fighting and aware of their behavior, but not too seriously disturbed in their relationship. All couples then took the pretests. From these interviews with 20 couples, 10 were selected, and divided into experimental and control groups of 5 couples each.

The marathon workshop ran from 9AM to 6PM on Saturday and from 9AM to 4PM on Sunday. The first day began with couples asked to introduce themselves and tell something about how they acted when they were angry with each other, and how they were feeling at the present moment about participating. Leaders then gave their expectations for the group, and suggested ground rules, including members' right to call a halt if they felt they were being pushed too far.

The setting and evaluation of individualized concrete behavioral goals was a major theme in the workshop. The next activity consisted of explanation of why and how to use behavioral goals, with programmed worksheets to help participants become aware of their present behavior, as well as the desired behavior, with regard to their selected goals. Couples worked individually then as a group to help make goals more specific and concrete.

Next, non-verbal get-acquannted and aggressive warm-up exercises were used, concluding with pillow pounding. After discussion of this experience, couples were asked to have their first fight as a "pre" measure. All activities of the workshop were videotaped. After all couples had had their 10-minute fight, the leaders described and demonstrated constructive and destructive fight styles, and passed out written material including the fight elements profile.

After lunch break, fights were replayed on the video monitor and each couple asked to comment and to score their own fight, then other couples asked for observations and comments.

A good feedback model was then presented by the leaders (What I hear you saying.... and that makes me feel_____.) Non-receptive and poor feedback examples were discussed and role played by participants. Then participants practiced good feedback in groups of three, with couples split.

To end the first day, a Jacobsen systematic relaxation procedure was used, and couples were asked not to fight during the evening.

The second day began with processing the first day and evening and re-evaluation of behavioral goals.

Non-verbal aggressive warm-up exercises were again utilized for loosening up and disinhibition of aggressive feelings.

Couples then reversed roles and replayed or continued the fight from the previous day, then gave feedback to each other on the reversal.

Couples were then assisted in having a constructive fight, following a series of stages (thinking out the issue before beginning the fight, deciding if its important, deciding how to place the gripe with the partner, stating the issue and hearing the reply, re-consideration - further negotiation).

Further fight analysis occurred in groups of 3 or 4 following a set of fight analysis questions.

Individual behavioral contracts were then set by each member of the group, with the group as a whole, the leaders and the partner, to be carried out in the month following the workshop.

The marathon ended with a brief processing and the Jacobsen relaxation procedure. One month later, the group met again for contract evaluation, taping of a final fight, subjective evaluations, and post-testing.

RESULTS

After participation in the workshop, couples' fights were found to be significantly more constructive than before or during the workshop, as shown by judges ratings of the videotaped fights. In addition, there was significantly more progress in the experimental than control group toward goals related to expression of aggression and conflict, based on scores on the RGRS. While differences in changes in the love relationship as a whole were not significant on the CRI, changes on the Friendship sub-scale were significantly greater for the experimental group, reflecting increased equality and communication. Changes in levels of self-actualization were not significantly different for the two groups, although there was noticeably more improvement in the experimental group. Workshop participants continued to improve on their contract goals, during the period of 1 month between workshop and follow-up. This confirmed our belief that once the skills are acquired, couples can and do continue to grow and progress on their own.

In summing up, I would like to emphasize the parallel between the processes in designing a workshop to facilitate particular skills, and the processes the individual participant goes through in acquiring those skills or behaviors.

The first step is to specify the desired behaviors, skills or "competencies" clearly: this becomes the goal. The separate skills components of constructive fighting are: (a) understanding and accepting conflict as normal and valid, (b) listening, (c) giving feedback, (d) assertiveness, (e) awareness of own feelings, (f) turning off anger or gripe to enjoy situation, (g) non-dangerous expression of anger, (h) defining issues; asking for change, (i) setting behavioral goals, (j) evaluation of progress. The second step is to become aware of ones present behaviors in similar situations. Thirdly, we specified undesireable behaviors (i. e., destructive fight styles or non-receptive

feedback) in order to suggest what to avoid and what present behaviors should be eliminated. The fourth step was to practice desired behaviors, beginning with the easiest to acquire or the present behavior and progressing toward the goal. The fifth step is evaluation. Was the goal actually reached? How close did we get? What remains to be done? How could we do it better next time? These 5 steps apply to the workshop or course development and to the participant of any skills acquisition situation.

This study demonstrated that a complex relationship skill can be effectively taught in a brief two-day workshop. A number of related brief workshops might be mentioned here as supporting this point, for example, a one-day marathon workshop designed to reduce interpersonal anxiety developed by Eric Lutker (1975), the many assertive training for women programs now operating, brief management skill training workshops, the marriage encounter movement, human potential seminars, academic improvement workshops (C. Lutker, 1975) and others.

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